In Utah, the State Office of Education (the Office) began providing professional development on the new college- and career-ready standards the first year after their adoption, but teachers weren’t expected to implement them right away. They chose a staggered approach, with the English language arts standards expected to be implemented in Utah classrooms in 2011, along with 6th and 9th grade mathematics. In 2012, the rest of the elementary math grades were added along with 10th grade math, with full implementation in 2013.

In the first year of standards implementation, the Office worked to get the word out on the changes. Content area specialists began the dialogue in their meetings with local district staff, while other agency staff worked with superintendents and curriculum directors to communicate the change, as press releases were used to help spread the work to the public at large.

In-person Professional Development for Teachers

In the summer of 2011 the Office began the Core Academy, a series of 4-day in-person meetings in a variety of locations across the state. The intensive professional development series focused on different parts of the standards each year, with specific English language arts and math grade levels. The Office wanted teachers to have an opportunity to dig deep into the standards, focusing on the instructional shifts and content.

Over the four years of the Core Academy approximately 5,000 teachers per year were engaged in the state-offered professional development at no cost to districts. Originally the state’s focus for delivering professional development was through this regional, face-to-face approach, at one time hosting academies at 15 different locations.

While Office officials were very pleased with the number of teachers engaged in the learning, it wasn’t possible to reach all teachers. They knew there were limitations to the model. Utah has some very remote regions making it difficult to reach everyone. Due to these geographical challenges, the Office began moving to a blended model, with online networks and instruction, interspersed with face-to-face meetings.
Utilizing Open Educational Resources Due to Lack of Aligned Materials

At the same time the state was focusing on professional development specific to content and instructional shifts, districts were expected to concentrate on unpacking the standards. Local districts began the process of curriculum mapping based on local resources, materials, and contexts.

One of the biggest needs teachers identified early on was a lack of resources aligned to the Utah Core Standards. The Office received $2 million in 2011 from the state legislature for implementation of the new standards, funding that was to be used for professional and resource development. That figure was reduced to $500,000 in its last year of funding in 2016. Part of that funding allowed creation of resources to help develop local district capacity in implementing the new, higher standards.

“This idea that building capacity is very important and recognizing that teachers are professionals and treating them as such is very important to standards implementation,” said Diana Suddreth, Director of Teaching and Learning at the Utah State Office of Education.

The Office says that challenge has actually turned into one of its biggest successes. They’ve created a number of open educational resources (OER) available online for free, giving teachers an opportunity to access quality materials aligned to the Utah Core Standards. They developed the Mathematics Vision Project, an actual curriculum for the integrated pathway for high school and middle school that is being used nationwide.

In addition to the Mathematics Vision Project the Office developed core guides in math. They were simple, one page guides for secondary teachers and a bit larger for elementary grades. The guides covered vocabulary, background knowledge on the standards, what a performance-based task look like, and what a skills-based task looks like pertaining to the individual standards. Teachers embraced these guides and said that they helped them learn what the assessments are measuring. The guides brought clarity to the standards and helped teachers understand what to look for when developing their own assessments.

Utah education officials felt creating the resources was a form of professional development. They worked with small groups of teachers to develop them and then brought in larger groups to facilitate the discussions concerning the materials. They wanted to empower teachers to be leaders, take ownership for the materials and in the process develop additional capacity.

“This idea that building capacity is very important and recognizing that teachers are professionals and treating them as such is very important to standards implementation,” said Diana Suddreth, Director of Teaching and Learning at the Utah State Office of Education. “They felt comfortable with the resources we developed because we didn’t leave them high and dry.”

Lessons Learned and Instructional Improvement

In Utah they felt it was important to get stakeholder support for the standards early on. A committee of higher education professionals, K-12 educators, parents, and others was convened to study the standards and validate that they were appropriate for the state’s students. Parents were one audience they felt they needed more support with. They didn’t
anticipate the monumental shift the new standards would pose for parents, who were previously engaged in helping students do homework, but were no longer able to help. While they did work with the PTA and local districts to engage parents, in hindsight they wish they would have been more active in anticipating the change the new standards meant for parents.

**Teachers are really deepening their own knowledge and getting kids to perform at a higher level.**

Local districts and teachers recognized this as a new way of doing business for the kids. “Teachers were willing to go into this bold new adventure and tell the success that results from deeper understanding of content and how that helps students,” said Suddreth.

Suddreth says the impact in the classroom has been huge. Teachers are really deepening their own knowledge and getting kids to perform at a higher level. The greater emphasis on writing as a critical skill has seen the English language arts standards move into other subjects like social studies and science. Math has been more engaging, instead of watching teachers give examples, students are active participants, helping to shape their own learning. The focus has changed from learning a specific skill to building a better understanding of content and learning to apply that knowledge.
The Salt Lake City School District is a diverse urban district where nearly 60 percent of all students are low income, 43 percent are white, and 38 percent are Hispanic. The majority of schools in the district are Title I.

The district has an advantage that most local education agencies throughout the state of Utah don’t have when it comes to implementing the Utah Core Standards — a cadre of academic coaches that can provide teachers with extra support. When Utah first adopted the new college- and career-ready standards in math and English language arts this cadre of coaches became the districts go-to team to help facilitate districtwide implementation. Administrators made sure to get the coaches on board first, focusing their efforts to understand the standards themselves and then to provide support to the classroom teachers they serve as they make the shift to teaching to the new standards.

Salt Lake City District Officials say one of the most beneficial supports they received were the Core Academies that were run by the Utah State Office of Education (the Office). Salt Lake City sent their coaches to the academy for the training with a goal of bringing back what they learned to the district to share with other teachers.

The biggest challenge district teachers faced was the availability of instructional materials that actually reflected the new standards. They chose a math program that was closely aligned to the standards, and as they replace their consumable materials they have been able to adopt materials more closely aligned to the standards. The district just this school year adopted an English language arts program that they feel truly reflects the standards.

Initially, in middle school and high school they didn’t have any materials that were aligned to the new standards. They again credit the Office with providing much needed resources and guidance. While many local districts, Salt Lake included, were working their way through the standards, unpacking them and finding materials on their own, they say the Office realized that high school teachers were struggling in the new integrated math. The state developed the Mathematics Vision Project, which included core guides for middle school and high schools to use that followed the integrated pathway. In addition to using the math core guides, teachers in the Salt Lake District also use the open educational resources (OERs) the state developed and made available for free.

An integral part of the successful implementation of the new standards in Salt Lake City is the use of local assessments. The district’s cadre of academic coaches wrote interim assessments for district teachers to use that reflect the actual expectation of the core standards. The Salt Lake coaches helped write the state assessments and so the local assessments are highly correlated. These coaches have helped the teachers use these interim assessments to guide their instruction, indicating a level of expectation and reasoning.
They have helped teachers understand how to make adjustments based on the results.

Barbara Kuehl is the Director of Professional Development for the Salt Lake City School District. She says the most exciting part of moving to new standards is the instructional shift and how it has caused a deeper attention to learning.

“That is definitely one of the things you see everywhere. We’ve got some teachers very good at supporting students in English language arts and math,” said Kuehl. “There is more reasoning, higher order thinking, more justification, more classrooms discussion. Teachers are getting very good at hosting the discourse. Teachers just talking is being challenged.”

Kuehl says the switch to new standards has helped to even the playing field across the district. Many people felt that students couldn’t do the more rigorous work expected under the new standards, however, what has been shown is that they can and that students need to be involved more in leading their own learning.